

AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM

Also by Jason Koo

Poetry

More Than Mere Light

Man on Extremely Small Island

As Coeditor

Brooklyn Poets Anthology

AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM

JASON KOO

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America's Favorite Poem

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for Anna Greenberg

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Just needed time alone with my own thoughts
Got treasures in my mind but couldn't open up my own vault
My childlike creativity, purity and honesty
Is honestly being crowded by these grown thoughts
Reality is catchin' up with me
Takin' my inner child, I'm fightin' for it, custody
With these responsibilities that they entrusted me
As I look down at my diamond-encrusted piece

—Kanye West

AMERICAN DREAM

after Shakespeare 129

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.
What's the point of being ridiculous?
Over and over and over again, it seems.

Enough's enough, enough to make you scream.
Well, you don't. You're quiet. Meticulous.
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.

You browse through dirty thumbnails on a screen
Then click Clear History, recoil in disgust.
Over and over and over again, it seems.

This gives new meaning to the phrase *come clean*.
A silly sully-cycle—you're into this?
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme?

Not a human being but an in-between,
There, not there, there and not there, more or less
Over and over and over again, it seems.

Oh Mister Umpteen, Mixmaster Misqueme,
What's the point of being ridiculous?
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.
Over and over and over again you dream.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF MY NAME

after Google

Today I read that only 2.2%
out of a million first and last names
have a higher vowel than consonant ratio,
and, since 50% of the letters
in my name are vowels, this means
I am “extremely well envoweled.”
I go outside strutting the bulge
in my name: the trees are wowed
by my vowels, they only have two e’s,
which is why they have no leaves
at this time of year: the snow must submit
to the scrunch of my boots,
snow only has one o and I have three,
even my boots, so tough and rugged,
clearly dominating the one-o’d
snow, must bow down to the deity
of me, with three, never raising
themselves higher than my feet:

I cross the bridge and it is the same,
the river cannot keep up
with me, look at it writhing in the ice,
so fearsome with its 66.7%
envowelment but not so
intimidating to me, because ice,
if you’ll notice, slides on its c,
eventually skidding to a stop
like a hockey player before the puck
of the e: which in a flick
disappears: whereas I keep floating out
on my opening of o’s, the song

of my name is repeated through nature,
 cuckoos and owls take pleasure
in perpetuating it, just one koo
 is never enough for them, koo
must always come coupling

 through their throats: you can hear
this song taken up by schoolchildren,
 I used to hear it all the time,
I thought kids were taunting me
 but now I know they were just jealous
of my o's: they saw these heaped
 in their bowls of canned
spaghetti and cereal, but no matter
 how many spoonfuls they jammed
in their mouths, no matter how
 many more muscles they grew
than me, they never grew any
 more richly envoweled: this was just
something you had to be born with,
 a natural advantage of hailing
from a family that came from a tiny
 Pacific peninsula whupped
by other countries: our name shed
 contours of consonants
to slip past detection, shape-shifting
 into other words like a
syllable chameleon, from haiku to coup
 d'état matching colonial culture
and upheaval, so when I hear Hi Koo

 today followed by a giggle,
the laugh is not on me but on the oppressors,
 whose whole poetic tradition
gets wiped out by my arrival.

GIANT STEPS

for Gunny Scarfo

I'm listening to Tommy Flanagan and thinking of the quality
That separates great artists from mediocre ones: tenderness, taste, charm,
gravity, light—
But are you capable of some mean-ass fucking?
Tommy Flanagan, I'll admit, I was skeptical when I bought your tribute
album for John Coltrane,
Thinking you had some Giant Steps to fill,
But you, Mraz and Foster just *kill*
"Mr. P. C.," doing all kinds of nasty things to my cochlea, loosening my head
at the hinge,
Saying, Henceforth thou shalt never associate the name Flanagan
With lovely, tasteful dinner-time ballads,
The kind you put on when a woman comes over for your prefab middle-
class cooking—
I am not an ingredient in your four-course seduction meal,
I am not a twinkly Oscar Peterson background,
I am the author here, I will do you and do you and do you until I'm done.
Point taken, Mr. Flanagan,
I can scarcely understand how you're getting all this sound out of the piano,
You're just pounding away at me, what power!
(Scarcely? Stop saying scarcely!)
I want this power in an artist: I hate this new breed of poets
Who hate the word, the idea of power, favoring
Shriveled, dribbly productions, no chance of offending anybody, no chance
of not getting tenure,
And meanwhile, as Mayakovsky says, the tongueless street writhes
For lack of something to shout or say.
I went to Times Square for a Poetry Society of America reading,
Wanting to hear something to match that massive, Moby-Dickian energy,
To put all that commerce in its place, Sephora, Billabong, MTV,
To outlava the panoramic magma of ads,

But all I got were cool susurrations, poets barely able
To muster a look at themselves in the Jumbotron projecting them,
As if to do so would be egotistical, surely the worst sin in poetry since Keats,
No one wants to offend Keats! And no, no ego here,
None of these poets tried to publish or entered this Times Square Alliance/PSA
 contest or built up their bios,
They were just happy to be here,
Or not be here, manifesting their Negative Capability and leaving it to the
 people behind them
To stop and look at themselves in the Panasonic mirror:
People who'd never seen themselves
So glorious, laughing and making faces and capturing themselves
On digital camera, calling up friends and family members on cell phones to
 share their dwindling minutes
Of fame: one suited man, looking a little like the towering Jay Z
In the Rocawear billboard above us, anchored himself
Behind the poets in the center of the Jumbotron, brushing away the gnats of
 their faces
From his face, the true subject
Of the true new poem of America, assembling ominously
Behind the jigsawed pieces the professional poets were gingerly inching together:
As if he'd found his final home, arriving at total peace
Within his own vanity, not self-conscious at all about staring at himself for
 an hour,
And I had to admit, there was something impressive in this,
The way he so blatantly broadcast his own self-adoration
Unlike the poets reading, one of whom, my friend, called the people "disgusting,"
Or me, who wanted to be up there in place of them, thinking I could
Blow people off the block with my Big Verse,
Already imagining the poem I would enter in the PSA contest the next year,
But who after the reading just told everybody nice job
And went along for the free fancy dinner and stayed in the friend's free fancy
 hotel room,
Not bursting out of that bullshit, imagining I was better than everyone else
But acting self-effacing, thinking this would earn me points,
Not yet capable of the elevation

That could make that crowd go wild with something other
Than themselves, something Jay Z would've smacked into them in a second:
I'm in the hall already, on the wall already, I'm a work of art, I'm a Warhol already:
 yeah, motherfuckers,
It takes a real ego
To destroy the sense of ego, something all mean-ass fucking Flanagans understand.

AMERICA'S FAVORITE POEM

*In this country there is a universal third person,
the man we all want to be.*

—Don DeLillo

I'm dreaming of myself in the universal third person,
floating through Target and seeing drawers full of soft white
Merona cotton tees. Or maybe Calvin Klein, 2^(s)ist—
to exist means raising your life to the power of product x.
Sage green shower poufs. Striped FLOR modular carpet tiles.
The expenses disappear into far-flung credit card orbits
where the moons are APRs. Let's order sleek black Chelsea boots

by Hugo Boss, \$298 but excusable after months of browsing
catatonic in the office on Zappos.com. Brown boots
with snakelike stitching down the leather upper by Ben Sherman
and ooh, look, with purchase receive a kickass canvas
drawstring bag that solves the problem of how to fly
with a wardrobe that necessitates both brown and black footwear.
Messenger bag by Manhattan Portage. Watch by Omega.

Okay maybe not Omega. But to be able to fill that supreme
confidence of Daniel Craig's Bond in *Casino Royale*, to say, when
asked about the gorgeous timepiece on his wrist, "Rolex?"
"Omega." The confidence capped by a single branded word.
Custom-made tux by Brioni. Turnbull & Asser shirt.
This man walks on shoes built like Jaguars, sports a different watch
for every occasion. Black Victorinox Swiss Army watch

for bathing on a Brazilian beach in a soft grey Bottega Veneta
T-shirt (\$220) next to a bronzed, razorboned siren
wearing only a string-knotted bikini bottom by Melissa Odabash
as she arches back over a boulder like the leather strap
of a watch, flattening her breasts with one arm

and staring off into the oystered, Odysseus-laden horizon.

Classic Cartier with a thin black alligator strap for the October

wedding. He has a box to store his watches, tie bars, cuff links.

The box itself costs as much as the jewelry it contains.

This man has wicked white sneakers designed by Common Projects with nothing on them but the serial no. of the manufacturer.

He wears the sneakers in the summer with fine white pinstripe khakis not by Banana Republic. He has the crotch of his pants tailored to cup his package right. He has a tailor he can trust.

A tailor he need not tell what to do, who makes *suggestions*.

A female tailor with strongly sculpted calves and yoga contour to her shoulders. Who looks fantastic in a business skirt and sleeveless blouse. Who fucks him on a Tuesday-Thursday afternoon lecture-course schedule. In the dressing room, of course. This man does not have skin problems. He sees a dermatologist named Wolfe who takes a single seasoned look

at his dry skin issues and solves them without having to take a small skin sample the size of a fingernail. Who does not prescribe a steroid foam that runs out after a week and only aggravates the problem. This man fucks the PA with the fabulous thighs to punish her for making faulty prescriptions. She knows nothing about dermatology but who cares? As long as he's getting less than lugubrious sex for his copay. This man does not watch *The Notebook*

four times in one day because he's in an emotional coma.

He finds Rachel McAdams soothing, but in the way a nice Chesterfield coat is soothing, one night of the year and no more. She is not the answer to all his life's problems.

He has no "problems." He stays in motion, attacking potential problems like bicycle pedals that propel him forward.

His life does not depend upon the addition of this blender.

TAKE YOUR TIME

2008. A large circular mirror affixed to the ceiling at an angle rotates slowly on its axis, destabilizing your perception of space.

I'm not seeing this, staring up at the sky
Of myself, barely noticing the others

Scattered around me, or should I say
In me, happy to be free to look at myself

In public without pause, without self-
Consciousness, without having to act like I

Am actually considering buying a mirror
As I have done in the mirror aisle at Target:

Impossible to judge how you really look
Within the climate control of your own home,

So how nice to be able to study myself
In such institutional relief, PS1 vacuum-

Sealing the vanity out of my experience
And making it culturally pristine, stamped

With the Ólafur Elíasson imprimatur, a name
I'm pronouncing in all its permutations

In my head so I can drop it authoritatively
To friends, who hopefully won't correct me:

I check how closely I match the construction
I drew up, that sunny, relaxed Italian look

I was going for with this new white linen shirt,
These khakis, which earlier, at the MoMA,

In a narrower mirror installation, had looked
Too trim, but now, against the floor, projected

With such Sistine eminence, drape perfectly
Over my body, making me want to lie on

This floor forever—or long enough to net
A cool profile photo—basking in my Vitruvian

Ascension: I wonder if the artist meant this
As a joke, knowing we'd take this time

To “destabilize our perception of space”
By adoring ourselves and excusing it as “art”:

Meanwhile we're all flopping on the floor
Preening and taking pictures of ourselves,

Part of a larger, smarter installation, a diorama
On narcissism, on view to anyone passing

In the hall strong enough to resist the temptation
To join us: but no one's passing, everyone's

Coming in and looking up, no one wants to be
Left out of looking up, though this keeps us

Flattened on the floor, the mirror hovering
Like a UFO, allowing us to take our time

Taking our lives, not even needing to attack us,
Just letting us grow docile out of vanity.

GQ CORRESPONDENCE

Ass of the past is something nice to think about
Strolling down an autumn street in a nasty two-button tweed
Finger your argyle sweater to point out the fine
Complement you make to the pattern of falling leaves
The maple leaf is the best piece of autumn of the past
50 years and serves as an excellent emergency pocket square
We suggest the Paul Smith maple leaf square for \$495
Or the BR Monogram for \$75 or just pick up a leaf
Ass is accrued by properly tending to your belt buckle
Which should create a picture frame for the waist
Never make your crotch the Axis of Cheeseball
As we are fond of calling the style of Kim Jong Il
Calvin Klein is responsible for the most revolutionary underwear ads
Of the past 50 years just as Marky Mark is responsible for the most fitting
Book dedication: "I wanna dedicate this book to my dick"

FOR EVERY ATOM BELONGING TO ME

Sure, now you can walk, hold in your hand
a spoon, a ball, a book; bite into a carrot,
nicking the tip cleanly into your mouth;
piss drunk into a urinal, shifting like penguins
waddling through huge blue districts of ice;
swear at your mother, God, a football team;
swagger with self, the center of a sphere,
needing no help, bold-molten on your own.

But once you were nothing. All you ate was milk.
You spent your days wriggling on your back,
your head so heavy it pinned you to the floor.
Your mother picked you up, held you, helped you,
you can't imagine how much she helped you,
how much tenderness buoyed you from the start.

MODEL MINORITY

I was thinking on the subway yesterday and thinking I think this fairly
Frequently, *Fubhbck* these people...

That's just a terrible tie.

Those two mayonnaised over that whole swath of bench where four people
could fit,

Or six slim Asians.

I make myself into as tight an Asian as possible in crowds
As a courtesy to other people—

It's the model minority in me, you might say,
Coolly, while enjoying your extra space.

People move on me like a magnet: I'll be walking down the street
With a clear path in front of me

When someone ahead to my left swerves into my space.

Once in a hurry to Penn Station I tried to move past a young kid with my
roller bag

And he *kicked* the bag, sending it into the stomach
Of a woman walking towards us.

Of course I apologized to the woman, who looked at me
As if it were my fault,

Then ran after the kid, after first gently repositioning
The wheels of my bag on the pavement,

Of course I didn't "run," I walked briskly in a straight line wheeling
My bag behind me,

And when I caught up to the kid I walked alongside him and said, That was
not cool, sir.

I have no idea where that "sir" came from.

I might as well have said, That was a lovely ball, an excellent first touch.

The kid just looked me over and said, Fuck you, you fucking Chinese—
And stopped, thinking that was insult enough.

It's funny,

When I'm feeling sorry for myself
After something like this, my default comfort food is Chinese.

Not "good" or "real" Chinese,
But fucking Chinese, the General Tso's Chicken I've had

Photoclumped from state to state, the Chicken Lo Mein
Flaplocked in its warm white cardboard carton,

The Garlic Chicken with Rice I know by now

Should be renamed Garlic Broccoli Carrots Peas Onions Green Peppers
Mushrooms Baby Corn & Chicken with Rice,

So minor a role does the chicken play in this dish.

Menus should indicate it comes in two volumes:
Vol. 1 for dinner, Vol. 2 microwaved for lunch the next day.

A curious feeling I have

Sitting down for Vol. 2 of General Tso's Chicken, how removed I am

Yet somehow *in* those mutilated morsels, blasted beyond recognition

Yet somehow more recognizable for that, not even
Not even real Chinese food, just as I'm not even

Not even fucking Chinese, as I said to that kid, or thought I said, or thought
to that kid

After he kicked my bag and left me to contemplate

Serious violence only while waiting in line later for the bus with my girlfriend,

Who sympathized at first but decided I was being unpleasant, I could tell,
The more I mowed

Over the story, the more incredulous I got at what the kid had done.

Who is this whose grief bears such an emphasis?

I was not playing the role she liked, the role I'm happy

To step into late at night when I find myself
Walking behind a woman alone on a deserted street

And I become aware she's becoming aware

Of me behind her, I'm moving in a straight line and she's not so of course
I'm within a few feet of her within seconds

Making me threatening, I could be anybody, some madman wanting

To kick something into her stomach, I soften
My steps so she won't have to hear them but this makes me even more threatening

So finally I move past her without looking and let her see

I'm just a harmless Asian dude, me smiling, I can almost feel myself

Patting this guy on the back.

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Loaded Bicycle: “Close Embrace”

Matter: “Lunch Special”

Mead: “In Passing with My Mind on Nothing in the World but the Right of Way I Enjoy by Virtue of the Law”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Named one of the “100 Most Influential People in Brooklyn Culture” by *Brooklyn Magazine*, Jason Koo is the author of the poetry collections *More Than Mere Light*, *America’s Favorite Poem* and *Man on Extremely Small Island*. Coeditor of the *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*, he has published his poetry and prose in the *American Scholar*, *Missouri Review*, *Village Voice* and *Yale Review*, among other places, and won fellowships for his work from the National Endowment for the Arts, Vermont Studio Center and New York State Writers Institute. An associate teaching professor of English at Quinnipiac University, Koo is the founder and executive director of Brooklyn Poets and creator of the Bridge (poetsbridge.org). He lives in Brooklyn.